

GRAHAM MASTERTON: THE NAKED TRUTH

When I was 21 and the new recruit at a fashionable Sixties magazine, my editor went to the pub one lunchtime with the owner, leaving me to get on with choosing the photos of models for the main spread.

As I examined the transparencies through a magnifying glass, it dawned on me what a truly fabulous job I had landed. The magazine was *Mayfair*, the year was 1967 and the girl in the photoshoot was both stunningly beautiful and completely naked.

These days those photos would cause barely a raised eyebrow. Anyone with access to a phone or laptop, including children of all ages, has unfettered access to hardcore pornography that treats women as soullessly as meat on a butcher's counter.

It saddens me, and I feel sorry for adolescent boys who grow up with those disturbing or bewildering images as their introduction to sex. It's heartbreaking to think of young girls frightened by the violent, exploitative videos that are all over the internet, and perhaps thinking that this is how they are supposed to behave.

But in the Swinging Sixties, even *Mayfair's* coy nudes with their artfully posed limbs and coy wisps of gauze were regarded as shocking by Establishment Britain, and we had to be cautious over which pictures we chose for publication.

Our chief distributor was WH Smith and, to ensure they didn't face an obscenity trial, their lawyers scrutinised every page. Each month I'd argue that, for instance, a girl was not technically naked if she was peeping around the wooden pole of a four-poster bed.

If the lawyers disagreed, the photo came out. We were strictly forbidden to show any glimpse of pubic hair, and in the era before digital photos it was complex and expensive to doctor the four-colour plates. So by today's standards *Mayfair* was often quite a prudish place. The Marquis of Bath dropped into the office once and expressed his disappointment that there were no scantily-clad girls wandering around.

It was also highly disciplined. I was told firmly on my first day never to drink in office hours. With just me, editor David Campbell, publisher Brian Fisk, a secretary and a German Shepherd to get the magazine out on time, there was no room for slackers.

Not that it was joyless – far from it. My job interview was conducted in the pool at the RAC Club in Pall Mall as David, Brian and I swam lengths, and my favourite haunt after a late evening at the office was the Flamingo Club in Soho's Wardour Street, where musicians such as Georgie Fame, Eric Clapton and John Mayall would rock the sweaty basement till dawn. I rarely got a lot of sleep.

Part of my job was to commission the articles between the photospreads, what we called the 'excuse material'. Authoritative pieces about machine-guns or sports cars, and short stories by talented authors, gave our readership an excuse to buy the magazine every month.

At *Mayfair* I didn't have the budget for really big-name writers, but I did know the *avant garde* and highly controversial novelist William S Burroughs. I had written him a fan letter when he was living in Tangier and, after he left Morocco to get treatment for his morphine addiction in England, I would often hang out at his apartment in Duke Street, talking about books.

This terror of the literary world was a man of surprising decorum, more like a bank manager than a hippie. He was also hard up, and when I invited him to pen a series of pieces for *Mayfair* he quickly agreed.

But the features that really sent circulation soaring were our interviews with couples about their sex lives. I called it *Quest: The Laboratory Of Human Response*, and soon discovered that people will answer any question, however personal, if it is asked in a straightforward way.

Before *Quest*, all the sex advice in magazines was written up by doctors, like a medical prescription. We tackled issues in everyday language, getting to grips with the sort of questions that still matter today: why doesn't my boyfriend love me, how can I excite my girlfriend?

Right at the end of the Sixties, my girlfriend became pregnant. In those days, there was only one thing to do – we got married, and bought a house, though I couldn't afford anywhere closer to London than Lewes in East

Sussex. At the same time I quit my job with Mayfair and moved to another 'girlie' magazine, Penthouse, owned by the notorious Bob Guccione.

A New Yorker of Sicilian descent, Bob would have seemed a caricature of a porn publisher, if it wasn't for his magnetic personal charisma. He moved through a room with his shirt open, all chest hair and gold medallions, and people stood aside for him.

He also wore buckskin trousers that laced up the side, so tightly it was a wonder he could walk. I, on the other hand, was an Englishman and I wore a suit and tie.

The first time we met, at a party in the Penthouse Club on Whitehorse Street, he reached out, pinched the miniscule knot of my tie between his finger and thumb, and demanded, 'What the **** is this?' I didn't wear a tie after that.

The Penthouse Club was gaudily decorated with lots of art nouveau lamps and 'Pets' in skimpy gingham outfits with bows on the back. Rock star Rod Stewart used to drop in, and racing driver Stirling Moss was a regular.

But it wasn't a druggy, orgiastic lifestyle. We still had a magazine to get out, after all. And most nights I would make the two-hour journey home to Lewes, to my wife and two children, where we lived in suburban domesticity.

Because I was married, my attitude to the models was more brotherly than lascivious. At the naked shoots, many blokes couldn't keep their eyes off the girls and their assets.

But I always wanted to chat to these young women, to find out about their ambitions and listen to their problems. It was a habit I had begun in the days of the Quest column, when I realised that readers wanted to talk seriously about their love lives.

Bob insisted on photographing the Pet of the Month himself, often taking several days about it, and then chose all the pictures for publication. It was no good arguing with him: you had to use reverse psychology, to steer him into decisions and make him think every idea was his.

His American staff used to copy his style slavishly. He even had a 'MiniBob', an executive much shorter than him who also wore his shirt open and his jewellery jangling, just like the boss.

After Penthouse opened an office in New York, to compete directly with Hugh Hefner's Playboy, I flew out and joined Bob in a hotel on Manhattan's Third Avenue.

MiniBob was there, and several pets including a girl who had breasts like a pair of airships. Bob wanted to eat, at a fish restaurant called King of the Sea, so he and his whole entourage walked out of the hotel and down the sidewalk on this warm New York night.

Bob led the way, shirt gaping, half a hundredweight of gold bouncing on his chest. The girls clustered round him, while I – looking like a Bee Gee, with shoulder-length hair and flares like tents – was paying close attention to the girl with the dirigibles.

At the back, MiniBob brought up the procession. We walked past a drunk, sprawled in a drugstore doorway. He looked up, goggled at us and said, 'Jeez! Aliens!'

Bob was a hands-on publisher in every way, but I never heard any suggestion that he mistreated the models or behaved disrespectfully. His style was to let the girls come on to him; I'm sure plenty of them did.

And the 'Pets' posed more than willingly. One of them was my secretary, Lynette Asquith, who was a descendant of the World War One prime minister H.H. Asquith. Bright, blonde and busty, she caught Bob's eye and he invited her to model for him as Pet of the Month. She was delighted.

By the time I became editor of Penthouse, I had an almost unlimited budget to get the best writers, and I used it. The utterly charming Humphrey Lyttelton provided our food column. Jan Cremer, a Dutch painter, merchant seaman and outrageous hippie who wrote one of the bestselling (and raunchiest) autobiographies of the Sixties was our star travel writer.

Perhaps the best writer on the payroll was Kingsley Amis, who did the wine column and managed to make it informative, amusing and readable – no easy task. He maintained his persona as a blustery, crusty gent, but beneath the facade I found him sensitive and a fascinating talker.

I could also hire top writers for one-off pieces – such as *Twelve Magnificent Ways To Die*. Celebrity authors including Jim Ballard and Brian Aldiss, one of my favourite sci-fi novelists, pictured the most dramatic, ostentatious deaths they could imagine, all trying to outdo each other.

Fashion shoots were my domain too. One early morning, we set off for Wimbledon Common to take pictures for a feature I intended, in shocking taste, to call *Heil For Leather*.

There were seven of us dressed in leather Gestapo greatcoats, in a Nazi-style staff car, while a girl in suspenders and an SS cap rode in the sidecar of a BMW bike. As we trundled up Putney High Street we looked like a very unsuccessful German invasion.

It was an insane, intoxicating life. But at the Christmas party in 1973, everything changed: career, family, the lot.

My secretary was a tremendously attractive Polish girl called Wiescka, and the inevitable happened. We began an affair, and I realised that despite my wife and children I couldn't live without her. Wiescka and I spent the next 37 years together, until her death.

The funny thing was that Kingsley had phoned me in a towering temper about Wiescka, a few months before that Christmas party. He'd wanted to review a £120 bottle of Hungarian Tokay, and she told him he couldn't.

'That girl who works for you,' he fumed, 'you ought to sack her or marry her.'

He was right. But that meant divorce, and quitting *Penthouse* to start a new life. It led to my own career as a writer ... which started with the sex advice I'd gathered over so many years, listening to the models and the readers.

Under the pseudonym of Angel Smith, I published *How A Woman Loves to Be Loved*, which sold half a million copies in six months. When the Iron Curtain fell, it was the first sex instruction book to be published in Poland, as *Magic Sex*, and it's still in print.

It's not unusual for middle-aged women to approach me and say, 'Your book saved my marriage.' That's the greatest compliment anyone can pay me.

Sadly, *Penthouse* got coarser and more pornographic in the Eighties and beyond, but I'd long since left the Guccione empire behind. For the past 40 years I've been writing horror novels and now a successful series of crime novels featuring Irish Detective Superintendent Katie Maguire, who has plenty of personal and sexual problems of her own.

These days, I'm a grandparent, and I believe it is more important than ever for young people to learn about sex – and not from hardcore porn, which will teach them nothing but emotionless anatomy.

There is nothing more beautiful than a woman's naked body, and no better way to celebrate it than in the tasteful, strangely innocent style of *Penthouse* and *Mayfair* in their early years.

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